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Theoretical underpinnings of conservation in India

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Abstract

Paul Philippot, in his excellent piece, shares critical views on the notion of authenticity in cultural heritage as understood and applied in the Western context. His paper provides a brief background to the philosophical approaches to conservation and the ideological and cultural specificities that underpin these approaches. The following paper builds upon this critical understanding of authenticity', and examines this rather complex and elusive concept within the Indian cultural context. The paper argues that interpretation of history and conservation of heritage are articulated by cultural responses to time and space, and therefore vary from culture to culture and within the same culture.

Keywords: Authenticity - tradition - culture - knowledge - systems - time

The paper by Paul Philippot is immensely stimulating and thought-provoking. It raises several critical issues and complexities that lie at the core of cultural heritage conservation. The paper traces a brief history of architectural conservation and its key protagonists, particularly in the Western, or rather European, context.

The author of this piece is a conservation architect, practicing and teaching conservation in India. He has studied and taught at the post-graduate programme offered by the Centre for Conservation Studies, the University of York, United Kingdom; and therefore gains from a more balanced view on both the Western and Eastern approaches to conservation. The paper picks up the discussion on the understanding of time and space, presented by Paul Philippot, and furthers it to include cultural responses to the experience of time and space in India. It will examine the ways in which differing perceptions of authenticity have impacted the conservation philosophy and practice in India and Europe (including the UK).

The Western approach to conservation of historic heritage was deep-rooted in the 18th century scholastic ideas of Enlightenment, Antiquarianism and Romanticism. The growing appreciation of nature and natural landscapes resulted in a changing sense of beauty in contemporary Europe. Parallel to this "*Romantic Revival*" (Kain, 1981), there developed an interest toward the picturesque aesthetics, particularly in the English countryside. This picturesque aimed to highlight the calmness and tranquillity of sprawling scenery and vast irregular landscapes. The romantic mood and picturesque emotion redefined the idea of beauty, by reinforcing a certain pleasing quality in nature's roughness and wilderness. These sentimental associations with nature, along with literature, and social and scholastic developments in the 19th century contributed significantly toward fertilising the seedbed of conservation in a broad sense. The relics of past periods were now regarded as historic documents to be studied, recorded, preserved and handed down "*instructive and venerable*" (Morris, 1877) to future generations. Imbued with meanings and values, these witnesses to the bygone civilizations were seen as a resource potential for maintaining cultural continuity.



WILLIAM MORRIS

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During the Italian Renaissance, the urge to preserve, and a desire to bond the past with the future found a successful expression in decorative arts, architecture and literature. Over the following years this nascent urge was transformed into firm beliefs, until the early nineteenth century, when the need to preserve historic structures was finally asserted by way of restoring them. This approach, adopted by Sir Gilbert Scott (1811-78) in Britain and his contemporary Viollet-le-Duc (1814-79) in France, proved an initial success, although controversial. In order to achieve perfection in reviving the original intentions of architectural purity in terms of styles, they practised severe Restoration of historic structures, and this provoked a strong critical attack. Viollet-le-Duc believed in *"unity of style"* (Erder, 1986: 131), and professed that the ideal way of preserving a building was *"to restore or complete it in its one predominant style - from the visual and structural point of view"* (Erder, 1986: 131). Ideologically speaking, Scott echoed the thinking of his counterpart in France. For him, purity (of a restored structure) could be achieved only by returning to the early style of architecture. Working primarily with churches and such like religious buildings, he restored the original late Gothic and Tudor expressions by scrapping and stripping additions and accretions made over subsequent years.

Consequently, a time-gap was created, which affected the study and understanding of the process of cultural evolution in history. Complete revival, though sometimes conjectural, was preferred and excessively practised, and this suppressed change as an essential aspect of evolution.

In an attempt to recover and reinstate what was perceived as lost perfection, these insensitive efforts mutilated the original fabric. The consequent loss of historical evidence and visible destruction of monuments in the name of Restoration provoked a severe reaction

amongst nineteenth-century scholars. They were proposing that authenticity was associated more with the surviving “half inch” (Ruskin 1849: 195) of the final visible layer of historic fabric imbued with “voicefulness of age” (Ruskin, 1849: 186). The stylistic restoration of previous decades was now referred to as a “double process of destruction and addition” (Morris, 1877).

Complementary to this critical attack was the foundation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877 by William Morris. *The Manifesto* of SPAB, drafted by Morris himself, provided a new definition for the works of art: “anything which can be looked on as artistic, picturesque, historical, antique, or substantial: any work over which educated artistic people would think it worthwhile to argue at all” (Morris, 1877). The philosophy expressed through the passionate appeal of *the Manifesto* is “coherent and logically defensible” (Earl, 1996: 42), but relevant to the context in which it originates. This context is not only a physical reference point in space, but also a distinct perception of time.

This brings to the critical discussion on the cultural differences in the understanding of time and space. The perception of time and space in the West and that in the East had significant influence on the evolution and advancement of their cultural responses to what is heritage? and how it is to be preserved and conserved? The culturally diverse notions of time and space imposed ethical and ideological differences in their approaches to conservation.

The Western attitude to conservation devotes more time to surviving historic structures -the relics- and emphasises upon the remaining evidence of the past. This belief identifies a strong distinction between the past and the present or future times, underpinning the significance of loss of what was; removing it from what is or what will be. Ruskin’s idea of the “golden stain of time” originated in this Western culture, and suggests an irreversibility of events in time leaving behind the traces or evidences of their “once upon a time...” fairy tale kind of existence.

Time is perceived as a linear progression - there is a beginning and a consequential end. An interesting analogy could be traced in Western classical music, wherein a piece begins, builds up through a body of notes into a crescendo, its glorious point in time, and finally ends. Christianity, a predominantly Western religion, places emphasis on the Last Judgement, which also suggests a unidirectional linear journey in time and space with a definite end stage. The more material aspects of conservation are not untouched by the dominance of this cultural specificity. The awareness of the irreversibility of time is apparent in the most controversial and equally significant concept of authenticity, which “in the West emphasises the temporal qualities of objects and events” (Menon, 1994: 39).

Contrary to this, the Indian worldview of cyclic time influences its own diverse cultural response, and provides a unifying concept of “Eternal Becoming” (Coomaraswamy, 1974). More than what was (the past), the emphasis is on what will be (the future), which is a consequence of what is (the present). Similar overtones can be experienced in Indian classical music, wherein the performer improvises on a *raga* (composition of notes), repeatedly coming back to the same point of origin, and thus follows an unending cyclic motion. Once the starting note is established, the composition can be developed and performed in more than one way with varying stages of crescendos; the mood of the music (and of course, the performer), depending upon the time and place of performance. This point of origin, established by the main performer, defines the time period for him or her and other musicians to identify the time-cycle within which they can improvise and return to the original reference point. This pattern maintains and controls the eternal recurrence of a particular *raga*.

The religious beliefs propounded by Hinduism, a way of life for the majority of Indians, preaches an eternal recurrence of events; an unending life-cycle which begins with the stage of creation, progresses on to the steady stage, finally to the stage of dissolution (bodily death), and back to the stage of creation or re-birth. This continuous cyclic process is a symbolic representation of the unending journey of the soul, the immortal Self. The pattern of eternal continuity of events imposes no segregation of the past from the present or the future. In fact, a simultaneous occurrence of the three time-references forms the essential inherent spirit of the Indian consciousness. This harmonious coexistence of time-experiences is expressed in the divine conceptualisation of the Hindu philosophy based upon the inseparable togetherness or unity of Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Protector), and Shiva (the Destroyer). This understanding of the essence of the world-process, in the Indian context, *"places no critical temporal value on man-made objects but transfers the quality of authenticity to the site on which the object exists"* (Menon, 1994: 39).

These fundamental differences in perception of time and space provide reasons why Archaeology (a science of digging the past and studying the finds) and Museology (the next logical stage of embalming and preserving this past) were alien to the Indian context until the arrival of the British. Unlike the West, in Indian consciousness the past is not seen as history, but as inextricably interwoven with the present, to be continued into the future. It is not to be learnt or embalmed, but interpreted and incorporated creatively in everyday life. The past is a point of reference in history, in relation to which the growth patterns and attitudes of human societies of all times must evolve.

In light of these contradictory contextual perceptions and responses, the differing philosophies and practices of conservation seem justified and appropriate to their own contexts. The Western attitude, expressed a preoccupation with material authenticity, and preservation of historic fabric. However, in the Indian context, *authenticity* is understood as a unified concept of material and spiritual values that are regarded inseparable to all the aspects of creation and all the concerns of conservation. *"More than all else do I cherish at heart that love which makes me to live a limitless life in this world"* (Tagore, 1915), Kabir, a medieval saint, through his divine poetry highlights this inseparable unity of material and spiritual worlds.

Whilst the Western thinker professed to freeze the expression of perfect beauty by preserving works of art as Monuments, the Indian master builder continued to practice his age-old crafts traditions. He believed in continuity of the craft rather than eternity of the artefact. An object was born to age, and finally meet its death. More significant were the skills, the rituals, the formative imagination, the passion, and the devotion; all collectively responsible for creating that object, and imbuing it with meanings and values - its soul, the life. He himself, the creator, would disintegrate into the constituent elements of earth, water, fire, air and ether. The master craftsman knew this very well. Such would be the fate of the objects of his creation, bound to deteriorate in time. What was immortal was his *karman*, the collective creative act or process. This needed to be preserved in its entirety; not frozen in time and space, but evolved and handed down to those whose footsteps can only be heard.

Therefore, in the Indian context, authenticity is associated less with preserving historic monuments and their original fabric alone, and more with retaining the age-old traditions and practices which created these monuments in the first place. Original intentions are venerated more than original materials. Authenticity lies in the living cultural traditions, rather than the iconic monuments they produced.

The concept of authenticity is transferred from:

- the tangible fabric to the intangible content,
- the historic building to the historic ways of building, and
- the object of creation to the collective creative act - the process.

Once the obsession is transferred from the historicity of fabric to the perpetuity of content enshrined in the fabric, the modernist notion of authenticity deconstructs and redefines itself into a neo-traditional idea based upon the reversal of relationship between fabric and meaning - tangible and intangible. This alternative interpretation of a cultural view on an authentic object suggests a renewed significance of an equally authentic process. Authenticity is now a function of meaning (INTACH Charter, 2004), and these meanings are imbued in any form of expression through the art of making.



TAJ MAHAL.
Agra (India) 2008
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Jokilehto, in his seminal work tracing the history of architectural conservation, includes a discussion on the philosopher Martin Heidegger's view suggesting that a work of art becomes authentic through (this) creative process, and is unique in its material consistency as a work of art that makes truth happen in its being (Jokilehto, 1999: 214). Heidegger's suggestion underpins the imaginative practice of making as a crucial element that renders an object to become a work of art, truthful and meaningful.

In the context of our discussion, it can be arguably concluded that the neo-traditional approach to conservation does not advocate that authenticity must be preserved. Instead, it encourages the indigenous practices of creating authenticity through imitation, replication, rebuilding, reconstruction and restoration. The INTACH Charter (2004) states, "*The traditional knowledge systems and the cultural landscape, in which it exists, particularly if these are living, should define the authenticity of the heritage value to be conserved*".

The fundamental notion of authenticity, as it were, rooted in the European post-war nationalistic sentiment, appears to be losing its own original meaning through changing times and evolving cultures. Over these decades, particularly in the contemporary context, this idea has led to a variety of philosophical approaches to conservation, the uniqueness of each approach lying in the interpretation of its own local cultural distinctiveness.

Jokilehto (1999: 214) writes in support of this argument: "*It would thus not be feasible to impose on other cultures the concepts of historicity and relativity of values as evolved in the European context; theoretically, each cultural region would need to go through its own process and define relevant values*".

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